FIELD GUIDE · VOL. 01

BY SAM MACDONALD

the most vulnerable host is often you

SELF PWNING.

A pocket field guide to stress, anxiety, burnout and imposter syndrome in cyber security, and how to stop compromising yourself.

```
$ nmap -sV --script=wellbeing localhost
PORT STATE SERVICE
stress/tcp open always-on
anxiety/tcp open what-if-loop
burnout/tcp open chronic-overtime
imposter/tcp open self-doubt v2.0
# 4 services exposed. patches inside ↓
```

STRESS · ANXIETY
BURNOUT · IMPOSTER SYNDROME

TIPS · CHECKLISTS
WORKSHEETS · RESOURCES

// README FIRST

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

pwn yourself less. patch yourself more.

What "self pwning" means

In security, to get pwned is to be compromised. Self pwning is what happens when the threat is coming from inside: stress we never deal with, anxiety that won't switch off, burnout we push through, and an inner voice convinced we're a fraud.

This guide walks through all four. For each one: what it is, how to spot it, why our industry is especially exposed, and practical ways to patch it.

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> **Not medical advice.** This guide is written by a security person, not a mental health professional. If you're struggling, talk to a GP, doctor or therapist. If you're in immediate danger, call your local emergency number now.

// PART 1 · STRESS & ANXIETY

WHAT IS STRESS?

some stress is useful. it's all about the dose

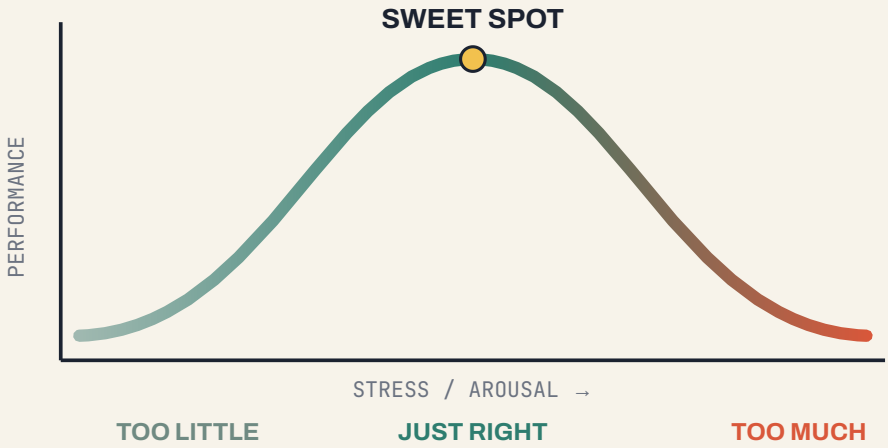
Your body's own incident response

> *A physical and emotional response to pressures or demands, which happens when the challenges you face exceed your perceived ability to cope.*

- **Not a medical condition** in itself, but persistent stress can feed into physical and mental health problems.
- **No definitive test.** It's recognised through common signs and patterns (next page).

THE YERKES–DODSON LAW

Performance improves as pressure rises, but only up to a point. Past that, more stress makes us worse, not better.



Too little	Just right	Too much
Boredom, low motivation, underperformance	Focus, energy, your best work	Overwhelm, anxiety, mistakes

"Arousal" here means how switched-on your brain and body are, nothing more. It's a simplified, widely used model, not a precise law.

// DETECTION ENGINEERING

SIGNS OF STRESS

your body logs everything. read the logs

Indicators of compromise for humans

Under pressure, your body releases stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol to get you ready to fight or run. Brilliant for a two-hour incident. Not so good for a four-month project. Tick what you've noticed lately.

In your body

- ☐ Muscle aches and headaches
- ☐ Sleep problems
- ☐ Fatigue
- ☐ Feeling sick, dizzy or faint
- ☐ Existing health problems getting worse
- ☐ Changes to your menstrual cycle

In how you behave

- ☐ Eating too much or too little
- ☐ Irritability or mood swings
- ☐ Crying or feeling tearful
- ☐ Unable to concentrate
- ☐ Grinding teeth, clenching your jaw
- ☐ Withdrawing from people

> **Bored-out is real too**
>
> Look at the left side of the curve. Weeks with nothing to do, such as waiting on clearances, sitting "on the bench" between projects, or a role that's gone quiet, can be just as draining as overwork. Low motivation, skipping exercise, drinking more and worrying that you're not needed are all common there.

```
# box_breathing.sh · run when stress spikes
for i in 1..4: inhale 4s → hold 4s → exhale 4s → hold 4s
# slows your heart rate · works mid-call · nobody will notice
```

Pattern, not panic. One bad night isn't a breach. Several signs sticking around for weeks is worth acting on.

// PART 1 · STRESS & ANXIETY

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

a false positive still feels real

When the alarm keeps ringing after the threat has gone

> *A psychological and physical response involving persistent worry, fear or unease, often out of proportion to the situation or without a clear trigger.*

Anxiety isn't always a medical condition. But ongoing or intense anxiety can be part of an anxiety disorder, such as generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), which deserves a professional assessment.

In your body

- ☐ A churning stomach
- ☐ Sleep problems
- ☐ Faster breathing
- ☐ Fast, thumping or irregular heartbeat
- ☐ Panic attacks
- ☐ Restless, can't sit still

In your mind

- ☐ Tense, nervous, can't relax
- ☐ Low mood
- ☐ Constant need for reassurance
- ☐ Worrying people are upset with you
- ☐ Rumination
- ☐ Worrying about what might happen

Panic attack: a sudden wave of intense fear with strong physical reactions when there's no real danger. It can feel like losing control or a heart attack. If you're ever unsure whether it's panic or your heart, get medical help.

Grounding: the 5-4-3-2-1 scan

When anxiety spirals, slowly name what's around you: **5** things you can see (a mug, a window, your keyboard), **4** things you can touch (your feet on the floor, the chair at your back), **3** things you can hear (a laptop fan, traffic, your breathing), **2** things you can smell (coffee, soap) and **1** thing you can taste (a sip of water). It pulls your attention back into the present.

Rumination: replaying a bad experience or situation over and over, like a failed exploit stuck in a loop.

// THREAT INTELLIGENCE

WHY CYBER IS EXPOSED

attackers need to get lucky once. you know the rest

Stress and anxiety threat actors in our industry

CHRONIC WORKLOAD STRESS — CRITICAL

Continuous monitoring and alert queues that never end. "Always on alert" slowly becomes vigilance fatigue, exhaustion and burnout.

BACK-TO-BACK ENGAGEMENTS — CRITICAL

A new client, scope and tech stack every week or two, with utilisation targets and report deadlines stacking up behind each test. There's rarely time to recover in between.

ACUTE INCIDENT STRESS — HIGH

Responding to breaches creates high-pressure moments: adrenaline spikes, broken sleep and mental fatigue, often outside working hours.

THE "EMPTY REPORT" FEAR — HIGH

Days into a test with nothing to show. Clients expect findings, and a clean report can feel like proof you missed something, even when the environment is genuinely solid.

FEAR OF FAILURE ANXIETY — HIGH

A single mistake could mean a breach, financial loss or reputational damage. And blame often lands on people, not systemic failures.

ORGANISATIONAL PRESSURE — MEDIUM

Conflicting priorities: strong security without disrupting the business, on a tight budget, explained to non-technical stakeholders.

> **None of this means you're in the wrong job.** It means the job has real hazards, and hazards need controls.

// COPING STRATEGY 01

ORGANISE YOUR TIME

your brain is not a multi-threaded process

Scheduling is a security control

1. **FIND YOUR BEST TIME OF DAY**
   Do high-focus work when you're most alert: mornings if you're a morning person, evenings if you're not.
2. **LIST AND RANK YOUR TASKS**
   Most important first. Timetable when you'll tackle each one. Ask a manager or colleague to help prioritise, and postpone what isn't urgent.
3. **DON'T TAKE ON TOO MUCH AT ONCE**
   Fewer tasks, each done well, beats ten tasks done badly in parallel.
4. **TAKE REGULAR BREAKS, KEEP A STEADY PACE**
   Hard to do when stressed. That's exactly when it helps most.
5. **ASK SOMEONE TO HELP!**
   Delegating frees time for the tasks that are actually causing the stress. Asking isn't weakness, it's load balancing.

Why it works

- ✓ gives a sense of control
- ✓ prevents last-minute pressure
- ✓ keeps focus on what matters
- ✓ protects work-life balance
- ✓ reduces mental overload

TODAY'S TOP THREE

1. .....
2. .....
3. .....

// COPING STRATEGY 02

IDENTIFY YOUR TRIGGERS

you can't detect what you don't log

Awareness is the first step to control

Knowing what sets you off lets you anticipate problems and prepare, even when you can't avoid the situation.

- **Track your patterns.** Keep a short log of stressful moments to spot recurring triggers.
- **Controllable vs. uncontrollable.** Spend energy where you have influence, not on what's outside your control.
- **Check the environment.** Noise, interruptions and bad ergonomics count. Triggers aren't always tasks.
- **Recognise emotional triggers.** Fear of failure, perfectionism, feeling unprepared.
- **Use triggers as signals.** Once you know them, they become early alerts to start coping before it's overwhelming.

TRIGGER LOG

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED	IN MY CONTROL?	WHAT HELPED

// COPING STRATEGY 03 · BASELINE HARDENING

DON'T FORGET THE BASICS

sleep is not a vulnerability

Boring controls that block most attacks

01 · EAT RIGHT

Proper nutrition fuels your body and stabilises your mood. Regular meals, away from the keyboard.

02 · EXERCISE

Physical activity reduces stress and clears your head. Even a 10-minute walk counts.

03 · SLEEP RIGHT

Quality sleep restores your mind and builds resilience. Most adults need 7–9 hours. Screens off before bed helps.

04 · SPEAK TO SOMEONE

Sharing how you feel eases the load. Friends, family, a colleague you trust.

05 · SEEK PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

A GP or therapist can give you proper tools. You don't need to wait until it's a crisis.

Alcohol & nicotine: a false patch

They feel like relief in the moment, but they create a cycle of dependency. Nicotine withdrawal raises anxiety, and alcohol disrupts sleep and lowers mood. Over time both make stress, anxiety and depression worse.

THIS WEEK'S BASELINE AUDIT

Eating regular meals	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	**Moving** most days	○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Sleeping enough	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	**Talking** to someone	○ ○ ○ ○ ○

// PART 2 · BURNOUT

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

running on 2% is not a personality

What happens when "too much" never ends

> *A state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged or chronic stress, especially from work, study or caring for others.*

- **Not a medical condition** and there's no definitive test, but it has very recognisable signs.
- **Remember the curve.** Live on the "too much" side for long enough and burnout is where you end up.

In your body

- [ ] Exhaustion and fatigue
- [ ] Sleep problems
- [ ] Muscle aches and headaches
- [ ] Getting ill more often
- [ ] Stomach problems

In how you behave

- [ ] Eating too much or too little
- [ ] Irritability, mood changes
- [ ] Withdrawing socially
- [ ] Emotional detachment
- [ ] Procrastination
- [ ] Unable to concentrate

Work-shaped or life-shaped? A useful test: if your energy and curiosity come back the moment the laptop closes (studying, side projects, hobbies), the problem is probably the job, not you.

Escalate now: if burnout has turned into feeling hopeless, or thinking life isn't worth living, please talk to someone today. Contacts are on page 19.

// ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS

STRESS VS. BURNOUT

tick the ones that sound familiar

Too much of everything vs. not enough of anything

STRESS	BURNOUT
Over-engagement	Disengagement
Emotions are overactive	Emotions are blunted
Urgency and hyperactivity	Helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of energy	Loss of motivation, ideals and hope
Can lead to anxiety disorders	Can lead to detachment and depression
Damage is mainly physical	Damage is mainly emotional

COMMON CAUSES AT WORK

Workload & pressure

- ☐ Unmanageable workload
- ☐ Unrealistic expectations
- ☐ Long hours

Control & recognition

- ☐ Little say in how you work
- ☐ Effort goes unrecognised

Environment

- ☐ Toxic culture
- ☐ Unclear role or expectations
- ☐ No manager, no support
- ☐ Unfair treatment

Balance

- ☐ Work spilling into life
- ☐ Job insecurity

> **Burnout is usually an organisational problem** that shows up in a person. Fixing it is not just on you.

// ERADICATION & RECOVERY

DEALING WITH BURNOUT

recovery is a project. give it a plan

Four workstreams for recovery

01 · PRIORITISE REST & SELF-CARE

- **Take time off.** Use your leave to fully disconnect, not to catch up on email.
- **Take regular breaks.** Stretch, walk, or just step away.
- **Prioritise sleep** with a relaxing, screen-free bedtime routine.
- **Eat well.** Go easy on sugar, caffeine and alcohol.

02 · SEEK SUPPORT

- **Talk to others:** friends, family, colleagues.
- **Consider professional help.** A therapist or counsellor can give you real strategies.
- **Talk to your manager.** If it's work-related, workload can be adjusted. They can't fix what they don't know about.

03 · SET BOUNDARIES

- **Learn to say no** to commitments that tip you over.
- **Separate work and life** with clear limits on your hours.
- **Disconnect.** Schedule time away from all devices.

04 · RE-ENGAGE WITH LIFE

- **Exercise regularly.** A 10-minute walk lifts your mood.
- **Make time for hobbies** and people that bring you joy.
- **Practise mindfulness:** meditation, deep breathing, staying grounded.

> **Be patient.** Recovering from burnout usually takes weeks or months, not a long weekend. Progress counts even when it's slow.

// PRE-INCIDENT PREPARATION

YOUR BURNOUT GO-BAG

snacks are a legitimate security control

Pack it before you need it

A go-bag is a list of small, ready-made things that reliably make you feel more human. When you're running low, you don't need to think. You just grab from the bag.

Ideas to steal

- Call a family member weekly
- Join a local club (running, climbing, anything)
- Walk instead of drive
- Uplifting podcasts and calm music
- Favourite snacks always to hand
- Alcohol-free drinks in the fridge
- A reminder to text a friend
- A catch-up with a mate
- Keep your CV up to date. Options feel like control
- Submit a talk to a community con

MY GO-BAG

- [ ] .....
- [ ] .....
- [ ] .....
- [ ] .....
- [ ] .....
- [ ] .....
- [ ] .....
- [ ] .....

// PART 3 · IMPOSTER SYNDROME

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

if 70%+ feel it, you're in good company

Social engineering, run by your own brain

> *A psychological pattern where you downplay your achievements and believe you're secretly a fraud who doesn't deserve them.*

It's not a medical condition and there's no test for it. It's sometimes called the imposter *phenomenon* for that reason.

Symptoms can include

- ☐ Sensitivity to small mistakes or criticism
- ☐ Burnout from overworking
- ☐ Fear of success or failure
- ☐ Impossibly high standards
- ☐ Low self-confidence
- ☐ Crediting luck or others for your success

WHO DOES IT AFFECT?

70%+
of people are estimated to feel like an imposter at some point

All
genders are affected

Age
Research is mixed: some studies find it eases with age, others find no link.

Experts
It's most common where expertise and intelligence are highly valued (hello, cyber)

As with most research here, studies vary and sometimes contradict each other.

> **Plot twist:** worrying you're not good enough usually means you understand how big the field is. Actual frauds rarely lose sleep over it.

// OBSERVED IN THE WILD

IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN CYBER

heard any of these lately?

Offence, defence, GRC, research. Nobody's immune.

- **High expectations.** Pressure to perform and fear of falling short feed self-doubt.
- **Constantly evolving tech.** New tools, TTPs, cloud, AI. Falling behind feels inevitable.
- **Fear of failure.** When the stakes are high, any mistake feels like proof.
- **Isolation.** Remote work means less casual praise, and more room to imagine people talking behind your back.

SPOT THE IMPOSTER THOUGHTS

PATTERN	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Self-doubt	*"I only got this job through luck. I'll be found out."*
Fear of failure	*"I'm not going to find anything on this test."*
Procrastination	*"If I don't start, I can't prove I'm bad at it."*
Overworking	*"Extra hours will make up for my lack of skill."*
Comparison	*"The last testers found a critical. They must be better."*
Overreacting to feedback	*"Report QA comments mean they've figured me out."*
Downplaying wins	*"Anyone would have found that bug."*

> **The colleague test**
>
> Would you say that thought to a teammate who'd just done the same work? If not, it's not a fair assessment. It's the imposter talking.

// COPING STRATEGIES

TALK TO OTHERS. STOP THE SCROLL.

you're comparing your 3am to their highlight reel

Two patches for the imposter voice

TALK TO OTHERS

Find a mentor

Someone more experienced who understands the challenges. They don't need to have answers. Listening is enough.

Get a cheerleader (or several)

A source of positivity to remind you what you're capable of and what you've already overcome. Family and friends count, not just colleagues.

Just talk

If a mentor feels like one more person to perform for, skip it. A quick chat to get the thoughts out of your head is often enough. Hearing it out loud shows you how inaccurate it sounds.

STOP THE SCROLL

- **The comparison loop.** The infinite feed shows you everyone's CVEs, bug bounty payouts and shiny tools, but never the hours, the luck or the years behind them.
- **Confirmation bias.** We seek out and remember whatever "proves" we're an imposter.
- **Small doses.** Cap your time. One well-known study found limiting social media to about 30 minutes a day reduced loneliness and low mood.

Source: Hunt et al., University of Pennsylvania, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (2018).

> **Feed hygiene**
>
> Mute accounts that leave you feeling worse. Set app timers. Follow people who share their failures and learning, not just their wins.

// WORKSHEET · CALL IT OUT

THE BS LIST

your brain lies. evidence doesn't

Debunk the obstacles your brain invents

1. **GOAL**
   Write down what you want to achieve.
2. **OBSTACLES**
   List what you feel is stopping you.
3. **CALL BS**
   Under each obstacle, write why it's not the barrier you think it is.

Worked example · Goal: move from the SOC into pentesting

OBSTACLE	CALLING BS
"I don't have an offensive cert"	Years of triaging real attacks means I know what they look like
"I can't really code"	I've written plenty of scripts to automate my day job
"I've never worked with clients"	I explain incidents to non-technical stakeholders every week

YOUR TURN · GOAL:

OBSTACLE	CALLING BS

// WORKSHEET · EVIDENCE COLLECTION

THE COOKIE JAR

a closed ticket counts as a cookie

A method from David Goggins' book *Can't Hurt Me*

1. **COLLECT YOUR COOKIES**
   Notice personal wins, however small: a tough task finished, a fear faced, a kind thing you did.

2. **FILL YOUR JAR**
   Write them down. Each cookie is evidence of your resilience and ability.

3. **REACH INTO THE JAR**
   When doubt hits, read them back. Past wins are proof you can handle the next challenge.



// BREAK GLASS

RESOURCES & HELPLINES

reaching out is a strength, not a CVE

Save these in your phone before you need them

In immediate danger?

Call your local emergency number: **999** (UK) · **911** (US/Canada) · **112** (EU) · **000** (Australia).

TALK (OR TEXT) TO SOMEONE NOW

Find A Helpline `findahelpline.com`	Free, verified helplines worldwide, searchable by country and topic.
Samaritans (UK & ROI) `116 123`	24/7, free, for anyone who's struggling.
Shout (UK) `text SHOUT to 85258`	Free, 24/7, confidential support by text, anywhere in the UK.
988 Lifeline (US/Canada) `call or text 988`	24/7 suicide & crisis support.
Crisis Text Line (US) `text HOME to 741741`	Free, 24/7 support by text, WhatsApp (CONNECT to +1 443 787 7678) or web chat at crisistextline.org.
Lifeline (Australia) `call 13 11 14`	Free, 24/7 crisis support by phone, text (0477 13 11 14) or web chat at lifeline.org.au.
Befrienders Worldwide `befrienders.org`	Emotional support centres around the world.

OTHER SUPPORT

Your EAP	Many employers offer free, confidential counselling through an Employee Assistance Programme. Ask HR.
Your GP / doctor	A good first stop for stress, anxiety or burnout that won't shift.

Numbers checked November 2026. Services change, so verify for your country.

log off on time tonight ♥

// SUMMARY

THE FOUR PILLARS OF WELLBEING.

MIND

Make time for things that bring you joy, and have a go-to way to calm down when stress hits.

BODY

Sleep enough, eat balanced meals and stay active. It improves everything else.

RELATIONSHIPS

Build new connections and work through hard moments together. Belonging is protective.

PURPOSE

Reflect on what matters to you, your values and who you want to be. It brings meaning beyond the job.

Don't self pwn.
Patch. Rest. Repeat.

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